

Disoriented

Written by Margaret Evans, Editor

Tuesday, 17 September 2019 12:10 - Last Updated Wednesday, 18 September 2019 04:59



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I've been hearing the word "orientation" a lot lately.

My daughter's friends have been going through their various college "orientations," learning what it's like to live away from home for the first time in their young lives. Meanwhile, Amelia is halfway across the universe in Ostrava, Czech Republic, struggling to "orient" herself to a new and very different culture. In a few days, she'll join 70 other Rotary Youth Exchange students – from all over the world – in Trenčín, Slovakia, for her district's official "orientation" weekend.

As of now, she's feeling fairly *disoriented*. As am I. What do you call a mother who suddenly has no child in the house?

Lost. Lacking direction. Uncertain of her place.

In other words . . . disoriented.

But this is about more than just my newly configured household. I'm feeling disoriented on a far more macro level – like tectonic shifts are happening beneath my feet. If it's true that "change is the only constant in life," I should be feeling safe and sound and damn near cradled in constancy. But those tectonic shifts, man . . .

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My church is currently going through a “time of discernment,” trying to determine what it is that God is calling us to be and do. What does it mean to be a Christian in “the post-Christian era”? What does it mean to be a Presbyterian, in the Reformed Tradition, at a time when that 'tradition' is 'reforming' so swiftly one can hardly keep up? All of Christendom is asking these questions right now, and they fascinate me even as they unsettle me, leaving me disoriented.

My alma mater, The University of the South (aka “Sewanee”), is also going through a time of discernment, grappling with its history – especially as it relates to slavery – and with what it wants to be going forward. I read articles in the alumni magazine and the school newspaper and I feel a disconnect from this place I’ve known and loved, almost a sense of loss, as I watch the institution struggling with a full-blown identity crisis. It’s challenging and exciting . . . but it’s also disorienting.

I understand that occasional disorientation is necessary and good. It’s the difference between growing . . . and growing old. If we never lose our bearings, never stray from our comfort zone, we stagnate and die. Stasis is a killing thing and cocoons aren’t built to last.

But while the butterfly’s wriggling and writhing to break free, I can’t help missing the caterpillar sometimes. The caterpillar was warm and fuzzy. Familiar. Solid.

Maybe I’ve just got Hurricane Brain. Hurricane Season is always disorienting, isn’t it? One minute, you’re preparing for work meetings and looking forward to social get-togethers – same ol', same ol' – and the next minute, you’re on Google frantically searching for a cheap, pet friendly hotel room that’ll let you cancel the day-of without losing your money. I tend to nurse a low-grade anxiety all season, myself. Just knowing the plans I’ve made for next week, or next month, could be uprooted at any time, along with that giant water oak standing dangerously close to our house . . . the house we just finished repairing after the *last* hurricane? Disconcerting. Disturbing. And yes, disorienting.

Heck, just being an American is one big exercise in disorientation lately.

For starters, there’s the political landscape. Anybody who’s been following politics for a

long time, as I have, is bound to feel disoriented. Not only has the center ceased to hold – thank you, Yeats, for that useful image – but the old definitions don't work anymore. I no longer understand what it means to be a "conservative" or a "liberal" – which was once interchangeable with "progressive." Back in the day (as we elders like to say) liberals/progressives were the champions of tolerance and free speech, but today seem increasingly judgmental and censorious. Conservatives were always the defenders of traditional values and American institutions, but many now seem downright eager to "blow it all up." I am beginning to wonder if anybody ever really believed in the ideas they espoused, or if it was all just an exercise in tribal identification. For somebody like me, who took the ideas seriously – and seriously wrestled with them – the question itself is highly disorienting.

And now we have the *New York Times* – our country's newspaper of record – telling us: "Our democracy's ideals were false when they were written."

Say *what?*

It's the opening pull quote of the

Times

1619 Project, a sweeping initiative that attempts to paint 1619 – the year African slaves first arrived on our shores – as America's "true founding."

"It's a very strange formulation," writes Andrew Sullivan, channeling my own thoughts in *New York Magazine*.

"

How can an enduring 'ideal' — like, say, freedom or equality — be 'false' at one point in history and true in another? You could of course say that the ideals of universal equality and individual liberty in the Declaration of Independence were belied and

contradicted

in 1776 by the unconscionable fact of widespread slavery, but that's very different than saying that the ideals themselves were false. (They were, in fact, the most revolutionary leap forward for human freedom in history.) You could say the ideals, though admirable and true, were not realized fully in fact at the time, and that it took centuries and an insanely bloody civil war to bring about their fruition. But that would be conventional wisdom — or simply the central theme of President Barack Obama's vision of the arc of justice in the unfolding of the United States.

"No, in its ambitious and often excellent 1619 Project, the *New York Times* wants to do more than that. So it insists that the very

ideals

were false from the get-go — and tells us this before anything else. Even though those ideals eventually led to the emancipation of slaves and the slow, uneven and incomplete attempt to realize racial equality over the succeeding centuries, they were still 'false when they were

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written.' America was not founded in defense of liberty and equality against monarchy, while hypocritically ignoring the massive question of slavery. It was founded in defense of slavery and white supremacy, which was masked by highfalutin' rhetoric about universal freedom. That's the subtext of the entire project, and often, also, the actual text . . . and the

New York

Times

is emphatically and institutionally endorsing it."

Put that in your pipe and smoke it. Mull it over. Walk around with it in your head for a few days. See where it takes you.

Me? I'm not sure yet. All I know is that I'm profoundly, fundamentally disoriented.